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MAKING FIRE IN THE RAIN

by Christopher Nyerges

I recently had the chance to try my fire-making skills in the rain. Our small Glendale City College hiking class met at 1p.m. at the Clear Creek Ranger Station, located about 15 miles up the Angeles Crest Highway from La Canada.

I knew this would be a challenging hike because it started to rain as we began our hike. Everyone seemed eager for the adventure, so we covered ourselves with our various raincoats, and headed up the fire road to Josephine Peak. The fire road is located directly across the highway from the Clear Creek Ranger Station. Though there is no sign that indicates Josephine Peak, there is a sign describing a pine plantation, which is a large area just up the fire road that was planted in pines in the early 1970s.

Though it was raining lightly, the view was terrific. We steadily hiked up the road and had a fairly good view of the city below, and distant hillsides covered with puffs of clouds. There seemed to be small rivers and waterfalls all over the mountains, a result of the torrential rains we experienced the night before.

We passed through typical chaparral vegetation, such as black and white sage, laurel sumac, native wild cherries, and some manzanita further up. There were also many eucalyptus and oleanders that had been planted years earlier.

After a steady climb of about an hour and a half, we had gained over 1000 feet in elevation. I made a decision not to go all the way to Josephine's Peak, since it would be windier and colder at the top, and there was no shelter. Instead, our group took a small side trail that extends directly east. There is no marker for this side trail, but it is fairly easy to locate. You are at a small saddle where the road begins to continue in several switchbacks up the back side of the mountain. At that small saddle, you simply look to the east, or the opposite side of the saddle where the main road is located. A small footpath continues to the east and leads you through some wooded pine.

This small path continues for about ¼ mile to a point called Strawberry Saddle. Strawberry Saddle is on the western edge of Strawberry Peak, and you could climb up to Strawberry Peak from this point. You know you are at Strawberry Saddle by the large cement water tank there. The water tank has the configuration of a mushroom, with a large concave flat cement top, which provides a little shelter for the smaller tank beneath.

We all got underneath this cement slab. We didn't get rained on directly, but we got a bit wet nevertheless because of the occasional high winds. Everyone ate their soggy lunch while I began the job of building a fire. I knew it would not be easy, but I knew it could be done if we spent enough time on the task.

I collected many old and browned leaves from laurel sumac bushes and from oak trees. These leaves were wet, but they had a good oil content which was ideal for fire starting. I collected lots of very small twigs, and a good pile of somewhat average-sized branches.

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Then I pulled out bits of paper from my pack, and had everyone pitch in their sandwich wrappers, paper bags, and anything somewhat dry and flammable that was available.

To start the fire – I had no matches with me – I pulled out my knife and my magnesium fire starter. I scraped a pile of magnesium onto a scrap of paper, and then sparked the shavings with the flint sparker built into the magnesium tool. The magnesium burned but the paper was too thick or too damp to light. I repeated this about four times until I finally produced a flame.

Once we had a flame, we carefully protected it and added leaves and tiny twigs. After about 20 minutes of this careful feeding and protection, the fire went out. I thought we had a least dried out some tinder and developed a good bed of coals, but we had almost no coals. I collected a much bigger pile of leaves and twigs and branches, all wet, and started again from scratch. Again, to keep the initial flames going, I used potato chip bags, granola bar wrappers, toilet paper, and some newspaper. It seemed that we almost lost it again, but after about 20 minutes we had a small blaze going.

As is often the case with such fires, you have to constantly tend it and keep adding small tinder. Though the flames were substantial, the fire did not seem to produce the heat that a normal fire would have. This is because most of the wood had to be dried and the water evaporated out of it before it would burn. So there was a lot of smoke and some reasonable flames, and we were all steaming off as we gathered in closer to our small fire.

Within another 15 minutes, we had a lot of soaking wet wood piled up around the fire so that new wood would be constantly drying out to get ready to burn. Most of us had dried off a bit from the fire, and we were considerably warmer than we'd been while hiking in the rain. And the water tower gave us just enough shelter that we felt slightly comfortable – certainly better than being in the open wind.

We all wanted to be off the mountain before dark, so we didn't take the time to produce a truly magnificent campfire. I would say that if we'd worked that fire for another hour, we could have been burning logs in spite of a downpour all around us.

In the beginning, everyone seemed fairly certain that my attempts at fire-starting were going to be futile, but after an hour they were convinced that a decent fire could be built even in the rain. Though it wasn't a "great" fire, it was a warming, comforting fire nevertheless under wet conditions where most people assume a fire is impossible.

Given just a few tools, a bit of experience, and a lot of persistence and patience, one can nearly always turn a potentially dangerous situation into a challenging learning opportunity.

Nyerges welcomes your letters and comments. Nyerges' wild food cookbook, "Wild Greens and Salads", is available for \$12 from Survival Services, Box 41834, Los Angeles, CA 90041. Also request his latest outing schedule.